

“Everything We Need – Body and Soul”

A week and a half ago, (as I mentioned before we left), I had the chance to attend, along with Rick Mark (one of our congregational members), the national gathering of our North American Lutheran Church, held this year in Charleston, South Carolina.

Over the course of the two days, (along with normal church business needing to be done), we shared with more than 600 others in (what really was) a celebration of what we are doing together as a body of believers to make a difference in this world for Christ.

One of the opportunities we had (while we were there) was to visit the headquarters of Water Missions International, an organization whose mission it is to help fight the global water crisis. If you look at the numbers, it doesn't take much to realize that there is a crisis. One out of every eight people in the world lack access to clean and safe water. Every 21 seconds, a child dies from a water-related illness. The numbers (in themselves) are staggering.

Last March, if you remember, we held a walk for water event here at St. Timothy's, walking two miles with empty buckets to a water source, filling up the buckets, and then walking back. It was an effort not only to raise money, but also (for those who took part) to simulate (and experience) what millions of people have to do every day simply to have enough water.

The insert in the bulletin today gives a preview. Next week, you'll be hearing more about what's being planned for next March (by some of our own members), with many of the area churches (being included), to do something similar, on a much larger scale.

As I reflected on our visit to Water Missions, on what the NALC is doing to make a difference, on what's being planned (right here) for the coming year, and on the text we have in front of us today, I couldn't help but make the connection. In Jesus, we have everything we need, both body and soul, to live a complete and a fulfilled and a satisfied life. Everything we need, given to us in Christ.

You know, it's interesting what comes to mind when people think about the Christian faith. This isn't a scientific survey; more of what I've seen and noticed over the years. If you were to ask people (on the street) what the Christian faith is all about, a majority (if not more) would say that it's about what happens when you die. The Christian faith is for happens when death happens. It gives you a promise. It gives you assurance. It gives you the comfort you need to know that life (continues on) even as life on this earth comes to an end.

Over the past few months we've had more than our share of deaths here at the church. Between Pastor Judy and me, we've had ten memorial services since the end of March. The most recent (yesterday) was for Frank Lovoi. If it weren't for our faith in Christ, what God has done for us in him, we would have had nothing to say at any of the ten.

The Christian faith is most certainly about what happens when we die. Death is our enemy. But it's a defeated enemy in Christ. The final word is not death, but life...and it's all because of Jesus.

But to think that the Christian faith is only about what happens when we die, fails to take into account almost everything Jesus did throughout his life, including the story we read today.

The feeding of the 5,000 is one of the most well-known and easy-to-relate-to miracles Jesus ever performed. We all know what it's like when it's time to eat. We all know what it's like if there's nothing to eat. You go to where there is. It's not surprising that of all the miracles recorded in the four gospels, this is the only one included in all four.

It's unbelievable what happened. Just think about it. Five thousand men, plus women and children; there was no food to be found: just a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread. And yet, by the time it was all over, not only did the disciples gather up twelve baskets of leftovers, but (Matthew tells us) “they all ate and were satisfied.”

It's hard to know where to start in this story. There are all kinds of lessons (all over), and (almost none of them) have to do with what happens when we die. Just look at what's found in this story. Follow with me as we make our way through.

It starts out with Jesus needing time to be alone. (You can easily miss it.) If you know the context of the story, Jesus had just found out that John the Baptist had been killed. His personal friend, one of his relatives, the one who was his forerunner, had been murdered by King Herod. That's the first verse. It says, "When Jesus heard what had happened, (John had been killed), (it says) he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place."

You know what that's like; times when you just need to get away; times when you just have to have time to yourself. In this case, it was a tragedy. John had just been killed. But Jesus (if you read through the gospels), would often, at the end of a busy day, (at the beginning of a new one), go off by himself to pray.

There's a lesson for all of us in this story: to take time in our busy world to spend with God; to make time in our busy lives to get away. And not just to get away to get away, but to get away and spend time with the things that count.

How much of life ends up being spent on things that don't? That was the message in Joe's sermon last week. People are running all over the place, (chickens without their heads), but with no purpose. They're in a hurry to get somewhere, but they're not sure where they're going.

Jesus went to "a solitary place" by himself. There's value in a solitary place. Not to stay there, but to be there (for the moment, for a time), until such time as it's time to go back.

From there, it says that "the crowds followed him on foot" and when Jesus "saw the crowds that had followed," (it says) "he had compassion on them."

You know, you come across that word "compassion" quite often in reading about Jesus. It means he felt pity or sorrow toward someone. More than that, it means that he was able to "feel with" that person, to suffer alongside that person.

Have you ever experienced that in life? I'll bet you have. To cry with someone, to weep with someone; to share an inner agony or heartache because of someone's circumstance; we've all felt it.

Paul tells us that we're to "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." That's the kind of person Jesus was. That's the kind of person Jesus is. No wonder people were attracted to him. They still are.

Jesus saw two blind men once. It says, "He had compassion on them." He met the widow in Nain (remember that story) whose only son had just died. It says, "When Jesus saw her, he had compassion on her." Over and over, again and again, people as individuals, people in crowds; one of the true measures of the greatness of a person is his or her ability to have and to show compassion.

You tell me. Is there enough of it in our world today; for the sick, for the elderly, for the forgotten; for the suffering millions in our world without the basic necessities for life? To say nothing of the spiritual state of people, which is even worse. Compassion? Do you have it? Do we have it? To the extent that we do, we're living like Jesus. To the extent that we don't, we need to work.

From there it says, "He healed the sick." That is, his compassion went to work. It made a difference. It was put into action. It wasn't some ivory tower form of feeling sorry, good on paper, as an emotion, but not in real life.

This is simple. To say that we have compassion and then never do anything about it; that's the book of James in a nutshell. Don't tell me you have faith (James says), if you're not living it out. Don't tell me you hurt for others, if there's no tangible evidence (in what you're doing) to show that you care.

Jesus (in life) would have us measure our compassion. This isn't about what happens when we die. It's about how we live while we're here. Take a look at yourself (Jesus says) and ask the question. Take a look at the people you see every day, as well as the ones you never see, and see where it is your compassion is showing.

So what if we can't go up to a person who is sick and with the touch of a hand heal them as Jesus did. (That's not an excuse.) There are things we can do; things we should.

Then (in the story) we get to the five thousand. There's so much in this story. It's such a seemingly hopeless situation. Jesus enters the scene and it all changes.

Now, I don't want to turn this into a story about what can happen when you simply include Jesus in what you're doing. You know as well as I do that there are many problems in this life (even with Jesus) that are still there. They don't go away.

At the same time, I don't want to discount the reality that far too often in life (even for the Christian) we try to take on life's problems without bringing onto the scene the one who can make a difference. Worse yet, we

intentionally (individually and as a society) choose to exclude the one who makes all the difference, trusting so much in our own “worldly wisdom” that we ignore the true wisdom that comes from God.

And so what happens? From five loaves and two fish, Jesus feeds thousands of people. This is craziness! The disciples thought it would never happen. Are you kidding? They thought Jesus had lost it! There’s no way!

Let me just say (here today), and let it go at that, and you make your own application, that God is always ready to exceed what we expect! God is always ready to exceed what we expect.

We can’t see the way, so we stop. We can’t find (or figure out) the way, so we quit. If that’s what this is about, figuring it all out (finding our way), then let’s quit, because we won’t and we can’t. But Jesus can. God has.

Then it says, “They all ate and were satisfied.” I wonder what Matthew meant when he said that? (Have you ever thought about that?) Filled and satisfied physically with food? (I’d imagine.) Filled and satisfied spiritually with Christ? Could it be both?

Just think of what Jesus said about himself. “He who comes to me will never go hungry...He who drinks of the water I give will never thirst.” He’s talking about the satisfaction of our soul. He’s talking about being filled and having enough, no matter what.

To be satisfied in life; not self-satisfied, not self-assured, but confident and certain and convinced that what God has given to us in his Son is all we need. I wish it could be said of the whole world.

How many wars would continue, if we were all satisfied? How much of the endless fighting would come to an end, if we knew we had what we need? How many of the hungry would be fed, the thirsty given water to drink? “They all ate (it says) and were satisfied.” And not (so much) for the next life, but for this.

Now, I don’t want to push this too far (here this morning), but do you think Jesus could have possibly been looking ahead to his last supper when he fed those five thousand? (We don’t know how much he actually knew.) I wouldn’t want to say for sure, but they all ate and were satisfied. They all walked away and were at peace.

Reminds me of what happens right here, when we share the supper. Reminds me of what happens in us as we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ.

And then we come to the one place (in this story) where this earthly event actually does give us a glimpse into what lies ahead. In this miracle of Jesus, there’s a foretaste of the feast to come. There’s a way for us to (actually see) what is in our future in this present and powerful miracle of Christ.

Symbolic, yet true; one day we will sit at God’s banquet table. Can you picture what that might be like? I love the fellowship of a potluck dinner. I love sitting with a cup of coffee and talking with people I know.

Can you imagine (what it’ll be like) sitting with all the people you’ve ever known, even with those you never knew? Don’t worry if you don’t know them. You’ll have an eternity to figure it out!

It’s quite a picture we get from this one little story. The feeding of the five thousand is filled with lessons for life. Today, I gave you eight. That’s more than any one sermon deserves; probably too many. We could have found a dozen or more if we tried.

I’m glad this story is in all four gospels, because it teaches us so much:

- The need to go regularly to “a solitary place” to have time and to spend time with God
- The importance of compassion for other people, and the need for compassion among us
- How Jesus helped others; he didn’t talk about helping others, he actually did it
- How Jesus solves our problems, especially when our own resources come up short
- How Jesus can make a lot out of a little; what he gives always exceeds what we expect
- Everyone was satisfied; life in Jesus is always abundant
- There’s a glimpse in this story pointing to communion; Jesus’ body and blood given and shed for us
- And there’s a foreshadowing in what Jesus offers of an eternal feast that is awaiting us all in Christ

If you don’t remember all eight, that’s alright. Try seven, or six...maybe just one or two. If nothing else, don’t ever forget that what Jesus offers is not just for the next life, but for here and now.

In Jesus’ life, preaching the good news was always accompanied by healing the sick and feeding the hungry. So it should be for us as we learn to trust and to follow him. Everything we need – body and soul – in Christ. Amen.